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A

SERMON

Preach'd before the

QUEEN,

At St. *JAMES's*,

On the 6th of *February*, $170\frac{8}{9}$.

BEING

Her Majesties BIRTH-DAY.

By *RICHARD WILLIS*, D. D.
Dean of *Lincoln*, and Chaplain in Ordinary to Her MAJESTY.

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M. DCC. IX.

BRITISH MUSEUM

PSALM XC. 12.

So teach us to number our Days, that we may apply our Hearts unto Wisdom.

I Doubt that at first hearing, the Words that I have now read to you, will seem an improper Text for this Day, which not only this Congregation, but all these Kingdoms, and almost all *Europe*, have so much reason to make a Day of Joy and Thanksgiving. A Day that gave Birth to our Glorious Sovereign; which must not only make it a Day of Rejoycing at Present, but memorable to all Posterity. But I know in what Place and in what Presence I am, and therefore shall not enlarge upon this Subject; But choose rather at present to pronounce the *Memento Mori*, which used antiently to attend great Triumphs and Solemnities. And whence should this more properly come, than from the Pulpit? Besides, that I see all about me in Black still, notwithstanding this happy Occasion. And after all, what more proper Meditation can there be for all of us, than when we consider the time of our coming into the

World, to consider at the same time, that we must certainly leave it again, and what is our proper Work and Business while we remain in it, and to pray with the Holy Psalmist, that God would *so teach us to number our Days, that we may apply our Hearts unto Wisdom?*

In the handling of these Words, I shall first take notice, in several Particulars, what is implied in the Expression of *numbring our Days*; And then shall shew you what is the *Wisdom* we ought to learn from each Particular. And this I shall endeavour to do with that plainness and seriousness, which a Matter of so much Importance requires: And I hope that all that hear me will attend to it, as a Matter that very much and very nearly concerns every one of us.

The Psalmist in this Prayer, that God would teach them to number their Days, does not mean that God would reveal to every one of them the particular time they had to live, and consequently the particular time of their Death; because that would be contrary to the Method which, for wise Ends and Reasons, God has always thought fit to use in the Government of the World. Of all that have been ever born into the World, very few have known certainly the time

they were to remain in it, and when they were to diſlodge and go out of it: Theſe *Times and Seaſons God has reſerved in his own Power*; and it is his Will and Pleaſure that we that are poor depending Creatures ſhould look up to Him, and wait his Call; be ready when He ſhall think fit to ſummon us, and thankfully improve that Portion of Life, which He ſhall be pleaſed to allot us.

This, I know, is made by ſome an Objection againſt the Goodneſs of God, and particularly with Relation to the Souls of Men: They think, that if People did certainly know the time they were to leave the World, they would then repent, and forſake their Sins, and fit their Souls for another State, before they ſhould be removed out of this.

As to this Objection I have ſeveral things to ſay, which I deſire in ſhort to propoſe to you, before I proceed.

1. The firſt is this, that if the Deſign of God in ſending us into the World, were to allow us a Liberty to indulge our ſelves, and ſin againſt him as long as we could, and He only expected from us that we ſhould ſome time or other beg his Pardon before we left this State; there were then indeed ſomething in this Objection: For I believe, that if every Body were ſure

of

of the time of their Death, more People would have this kind of Repentance than now have; that is, they would probably take care to paſs what they were ſure was the laſt Scene of their Life, with ſome Gravity and Solemnity, however they might neglect all the reſt. But then, whatever Encouragement there may be in this, for what we commonly call Dying well, there is none in it for Living well; and that is what God chiefly regards: All the Precepts of the Goſpel direct to Holy Living; but I do not know any Directions in all the Scriptures that peculiarly concern Holy Dying. This is a Matter which, I doubt, has not been conſidered as it ought to be, for otherwiſe People could never lay ſo much ſtreſs upon what is never once mention'd in all the Scripture. I do not mean by this, to deny that God will pardon thoſe who at any time of their Lives do truly repent and turn to Him: But there is great reaſon to fear, that moſt of that which goes under the Name of Death-Bed-Repentance, does not proceed from a true Change in the Soul, but is only a Sorrow in a manner forced upon People, from the Neceſſity of their preſent Circumſtances. And if we ſee ſo many that are apt to truſt to this ſort of Repentance, and to neglect God and Religion all their Lives, when yet they don't know how ſhort their Lives

may be, or how ſudden and unexpected their Deaths; how many more may we ſuppoſe would be inclined to it, could they be ſecure of time before them; and ſhould God let them know how long they might ſin on with Safety? And therefore God, who expects the Service of our Lives, and has laid Duties upon us, proper for every Age, and every Condition and Station in them, has, in great Wiſdom, left us in Uncertainty about the time in which he intends to call us out of the World, that we may be conſtantly upon our Guard, and improve our time, and in every Age perform the proper Duties of it; that ſo, whether we dye Old or Young, we may be able to give a good Account of our Lives.

2. Let us conſider in the next Place, That, though it is not improbable, were Men ſure to dye Young, it might prevent ſome youthful Extravagancies, and compoſe them to ſome Seriouſneſs; yet what an Encouragement to Sin would this be, to thoſe who were ſure to live to be Old? What ungovernable Creatures would thoſe be, who had Threeſcore or Fourſcore Years before them to ſin on without controul? If they were ſure, that, do what they pleaſed, God would not, and Men could not, take them away before that time? If we ſee ſo many Perſons

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ſin on boldly now, when they can't tell how near Death may be to them, or how ſoon they may be called away, to give an Account of themſelves; how little Effect may we imagine would the Conſideration of another World have, when it ſhould be viewed at ſo great a diſtance?

3. Such a Certainty of the time of our remaining here ſeems improper in the Nature of the thing for a State of Trial and Probation, and to be prejudicial at leaſt to the Exerciſe of ſome of the Nobleſt Chriſtian Virtues; ſuch as Living by Faith, Waiting for the Coming of our Lord, Keeping conſtantly upon our Watch and Guard, a Dependence upon God, and a Reſignation of our ſelves to his Holy Will and Pleaſure. Theſe, and the like Chriſtian Virtues, ſuppoſe us to be in the Hands of God, to be diſpoſed of as He pleaſes, whether as to Life or Death: And that we are uncertain how he will think fit to diſpoſe of us in this World, or when he will call us to account in the other.

4. I might add in the laſt Place, how much Trouble it would cauſe in the World, were we ſure when our Selves, our Friends, and Acquaintance, and Relations of all ſorts, ſhould be taken hence: How many Years before-

hand

hand would a tender Parent mourn over a beloved Child? What a Scene of Melancholy should we see in this great City, were we but sure who were the Persons that are to dye in it before the end of this Year? Upon all these Accounts, and many more that might be named, you may see the Wisdom and Goodness of God in concealing the Time of our Departure hence; and that therefore the meaning of the Prayer in my Text, that he would *teach us to Number our Days*, cannot be, that he would acquaint us with the particular Number of Days we have to live in the World.

I shall therefore now proceed, to shew you what is implied in this Expression, which I shall comprise in these four Particulars; and, as I proceed, shall shew you the Wisdom we ought to learn from each of them.

1*st*, The first thing implied in the Duty of numbring our Days, is, that we would consider that our Days have a Number, though uncertain as to us; that they are not like to be infinite, but that we are mortal Creatures; and as certain as we are now alive and converse with the Affairs of this World, so certain it is, that in a little time, sooner or later, we must leave this World, and enter upon that new State to which Death will bring us. We live in a Sceptical Age, in which

Men have brought themselves to doubt of many things in Religion; but this is a Matter cannot be doubted of, that it's *appointed for all Men once to dye.* It is true, indeed, that among the many Profane Writings that fly about, we have had one against this Truth: But I take for granted, that whatever the Author's Meaning was, it was not to gain Proselytes to the Opinion he would seem to defend. There is no danger of the growth of such a Heresy; for we see our Friends and our Neighbours daily dye on all sides of us, and our Towns and Countries every Day receiving new Inhabitants; and therefore cannot but conclude, that we must in a little time make way for others, as others before made way for us.

There is no Man who is not, in the General, convinced of this Truth; but I don't know how it is, that so few People are apt to apply it to themselves; and so the thought of it is lightly and easily passed over without any considerable Effect. It will therefore be our Wisdom in the Meditation of this Subject, to bring it home to our selves, to Number our own Days, and not those of other People. Let us therefore frequently and seriously think over such Thoughts as these. "I that am now in health and vigour, must in a "little time, if no Accident take me away be-"fore, be summoned to a Sick-Bed; where af-

"ter I have languiſhed for a while, my ſad Friends
"muſt take their laſt Farewell of me, as I before
"had done of others: And then I muſt be re-
"moved from this Scene of things, and be lodged
"in the ſilent Chambers of the Grave, where
"the World will quickly forget me, and I ſhall
"be quite inſenſible of all thoſe things, for the
"ſake of which that is in ſo great a Hurry.
Such Thoughts as theſe, well-followed and brought home to our ſelves, will probably have a good Effect upon us.

I now proceed to conſider, what is the Wiſdom we ought to learn from this firſt Particular, of numbring our Days, in which I ſhall inſiſt only upon this Point; That ſince we ſee we cannot live here always, we would conſider well what is like to become of us when we leave this State; whether Death will quite make an end of us, or whether we have not an immortal Principle that muſt ſurvive and live for ever, and conſequently make us happy or miſerable for ever. It muſt certainly be a very high Point of Wiſdom to conſider this well, becauſe the Wiſdom of all the Actions, and the whole Scheme of our Life, muſt depend upon it. If Death is to make a final End of us, it will then be wiſe in us to look no farther; not to trouble our ſelves with Hopes and Fears of other Matters,

but to make the beſt we can of our preſent State. But if we have an immortal Principle that muſt ſurvive and live for ever, then it is very plain that our great Wiſdom muſt be to ſee to that. Let me therefore addreſs my ſelf to you in the Words of *Joſhua* to the *Iſraelites*, *Chooſe you this Day whom you will ſerve.* Don't act by Chance, and without Conſideration, in Matters of the greateſt Importance. If the World be like to be your All, ſtick by the World: But if you have immortal Souls, ſtick by them. I do not ſpeak this as doubting which of theſe Schemes is true, but in order to bring you to a ſerious and impartial Conſideration; and then I have no doubt what, by the Grace of God, the Reſult would quickly be. And methinks we ſhould none of us be ſo void of Conſideration, as not frequently to put this Queſtion to our ſelves, Where muſt I be for ever? What is my Condition like to be in that vaſt infinite Duration that muſt ſucceed this preſent Scene of Things? I can't be here always; what will become of me when I am gone? Theſe Thoughts are ſo natural, that I am perſuaded they will ſometimes break in upon Mens Minds, whether they will or no; and at leaſt diſturb them, if they do nothing elſe. It will therefore be our Wiſdom to give them a free Courſe, and a fair Hearing, and not to diſ-

Joſ. 24. 15.

miss them till they have had their full effect; and then they will be the most comfortable Thoughts that can come into our Heads.

2*dly*, The next Particular I would take notice of, in numbring our Days, is to consider that our Days in this present State are like to be but few; that, could we promise our selves to live quite out the course of Nature, to spin out the Thread of Life to the utmost, and free from Diseases or ill Accidents to go to the Grave in a good Old Age; yet even that, when we come to it, and look back upon what is passed, will appear to be but a very short time. Indeed, if we had such a prospect certain before us, we should be too apt to deceive our selves with the length of it, as we commonly do in our Thoughts of every thing that is to come: But when once it is passed, it is then gone, we don't know how, and we are insensibly got into Old Age before we thought of it, and this long Life appears now but like a Dream. This is emphatically described to us in the Words of *Jacob* to *Pharaoh*, who yet had lived double the Years that most of us attain to; *The days of the Years of my Pilgrimage are One hundred and thirty Years: few and evil have the Days of the Years of my Life been.* This long Life appeared to him, not only as a few Years, but even as a few Days. *Tully*, in his Book of Old Gen. 47. 9.

Old Age, tells us, *That he could look upon nothing to be long that had an End*; and he gives this Reaſon for it, becauſe when that End was come, it was then much the ſame thing to us whatever had gone before; and all that was paſſed ſignified nothing. But the beſt way effectually to ſee the ſhortneſs of our Lives, is to compare them with Eternity, with that Immenſe Duration that has been before us, and muſt continue for ever, when we are gone. And this is a Compariſon that it concerns us often to make, becauſe the great Competition in Life is betwixt Time and Eternity; and the chief Reaſon why we put ſo much value upon preſent Things, and are ſo eaſily overcome by Temptations that offer themſelves, is, that we don't frequently make this Compariſon. As it is with this Earth that we live upon, when we conſider it by it ſelf, we are apt to think it a very great thing, we divide it into Kingdoms and States, and think Perſons to be great that have though but a ſmall ſhare of any one of them; whereas would we compare it with that immenſe Space about us, and with thoſe vaſt and glorious Bodies that roul about in it, it would then appear to be but like a grain of Sand. So it is with reſpect to the time of our Lives; when we conſider it by it ſelf, we are apt to think it a great while, and to

make

make it appear the more we divide it into Days and Months and Years, into times of Childhood and Youth and Manhood and Old Age; whereas would we compare it with Eternity, it would then appear but like a single Moment, *so soon passeth it away, and we are gone.* The Wisdom that we ought to learn from hence is, to get as great an Indifference as we can to all the things of this World, which we see can stand by us at most only during the time of a short Life. And therefore, if we meet with Success in our Affairs, if Providence bless us with a course of Prosperity, and with abundance of the good things of the World, let us have a care that our Hearts be not lifted up with it; and that it do not too much engage our Affections, so as to make us less mindful of the Country to which we belong, and whither it is we must quickly go. Let us with Modesty, and Thankfulness to our Great Benefactour, make use of the Conveniences he gives us but set our Hearts upon better things, upon *that good part that will never be taken away from us.*

And so on the other side, if we meet with Afflictions, either as to our Persons, or Relations, or Estate, or any other way, don't let us be too much troubled at it; but remember the Words of the Apostle, *Brethren, the Time is short.* Whatever it be, it cannot last long; none of this can 1 Cor. 7. 29.

follow

follow us into the other World. But if we are so wise as to improve our present Afflictions, and by that means to purify and raise our Souls, and make our selves more out of love with the World; we shall, in God's due time, come to that Place where *all Tears shall be wiped away from our Eyes*. But especially the Consideration of the shortness of our Lives, should put a Damp upon all the Temptations the World can offer to us, and shew us the extreme Folly of forfeiting our Peace with God, and at last our Souls, for any thing whatever. The utmost that can be pretended to by any Sin, is only to procure us some Pleasure or Advantage, during our Abode in this present State, which we all know cannot be long; and therefore nothing can be of very great value that depends upon it. Thirty or Forty or Fifty Years will be quickly over, and then there is an end of all these things for ever. And could we be sure to enjoy them so long, and be sure to be happy all that while in the Enjoyment of them, neither of which we can be certain of; yet what a poor Happiness is this compared to Eternity? *What*, says our Saviour, *shall it profit a Man, if he should gain the whole World and lose his Soul?* The Case is here proposed to the greatest Advantage on the side of the Sinner; for no Man ever did, or ever can gain the

whole

whole World by any Sin: But ſuppoſe he could do it, where would be his Profit or Gain by it? Why, he would only gain that which in a little time he muſt loſe again, together with his Soul. O! that Men would conſider this, who throw away their Souls, not to gain the *World*, but for Trifles; for a little Vanity, for Wealth, that they don't want, and hardly know what to do with; for Power, that incumbers them, and takes away the Quiet of their Lives; for Pleaſures, that deſtroy their Health, and leave a laſting Repentance behind them: For theſe, and meaner things than theſe, a great part of People venture the loſs of their Souls; and prefer, I won't ſay, a ſhort Life, but that which does them very little or no good even for that time, before that *exceeding and eternal weight of Glory which God has promiſed.*

3*dly*, I now proceed to the third Particular, of numbring our Days; and that is, to conſider that our Days are conſtantly paſſing, and that a good number of them, at leaſt as to many of us, are already gone. It is true in this ſenſe of all of us, that we *dye daily*, that Death daily ſeizes ſome parts of our Life; it has already ſeized upon Fifty or Threeſcore or more Years of ſome of us, and will quickly be in poſſeſſion of all the

reſt. Let us therefore have a care that we do not deceive our ſelves in the Account of our Lives, as if we had ſtill the whole before us; but let us deduct what is paſſed, and then we ſhall ſee that what remains behind is not like to be a great deal, though we could be ſure to live quite out the courſe of Nature; and let us remember at the ſame time, that Days and Nights very ſilently and ſwiftly ſucceed one another, and will be apt to carry us into Old Age, or our long Home, before we think of it.

The Wiſdom that we ought to learn from this Particular, is to endeavour as our time paſſes, and our lives wear, to carry the Work of our Souls even with them; that we may not be Novices in the Divine Life when we grow old in Years, and have the Work for which we came into the World to do, when we are going out of it. And in order to this end, we ſhould frequently call our ſelves to account, and examine what Improvements we have made of that time of Life, which God has allowed us. "I have now lived ſo many Years in the "World; what have I been doing all this while? "How have I anſwered the end of my Creation? "What Honour have I brought to God? What "Good have I done to others? How have I im- "proved my own Mind? Do I find my ſelf bet- "ter than I was ſome Years ago? Am I more

"Tem-

"Temperate, more Sober, more Chaſt, more "Honeſt in my Dealings, more Charitable, and "more Heavenly-minded than I was before? "Have I ſo ſpent my Time, that if God ſhould "call me away I ſhould be able to give a tolerable "Account of it? Theſe are very material Queſtions to ask our ſelves, becauſe they are probably ſuch as will be asked us when we come to Judgment; and it concerns us very much to be able then to give a good Anſwer to them; and the oftener we call our ſelves to this Account now, the eaſier it will be to give up our Accounts then. *Seneca* tells us of himſelf, that he uſed to do this every Night, and that he never ſuffered himſelf to go to ſleep till he had looked over the Actions of the Day, and paſſed proper Reflections upon them: And I am perſwaded, that nothing would tend more to our Improvement in the Divine Life, than ſuch a Courſe as this regularly followed. But if we think it too much to do this every Day, yet at leaſt we ſhould have ſome ſet times for it, that we may not be Strangers to our ſelves, and let our Lives paſs we don't know how.

4*thly*, The laſt Particular I would recommend to your conſideration is, the Uncertainty that all of us are in how few more days we may have to live. We may indeed *number* thoſe that are paſt, but what is to come is in the Hands of God; and we

can certainly depend upon no more than the Moment we at present breath in. This our Saviour represents lively to us in the Parable of that foolish Person in the Gospel, who pleased himself with the Thoughts that he had *Goods laid up for many Years*, and bid his *Soul take his ease, Eat, Drink, and be Merry*; but what follows? *Thou Fool, this Night shall thy Soul be required of thee, and then whose shall all these Things be?* This Discourse is but a Parable; but it represents a case very common in the World. Some are taken away very suddenly in the midst of the Gayety of Youth, pleasing themselves with the Thoughts of many Years Happiness to come: Others, full of great Expectations, busy with mighty Projects, and deep Designs; and some too with good Thoughts about them of Things they intended to do, but foolishly delayed till Death put it out of their Power. But having spoken to this Point, of the Uncertainty of our Lives, in the beginning of this Discourse; I shall not now inlarge any farther upon it; but proceed to take notice of some few Points of Wisdom we ought to learn from it; and so conclude.

Luk. 12. 20.

1. The first is, that if we have any good Designs in our Thoughts, we would take the first Opportunity to accomplish them: Delays are dangerous, and no Body can tell what may happen

to

to prevent us: It may be the Persons, to whom we would do good, may dye; it may be some others, who are necessary to assist us, may dye; or it may be we our selves may dye; and then there's an end of all good Designs as well as bad ones; for *there's no Work, nor Knowledge, nor Device in the Grave*, where we must then be laid.

2. This should teach us not to venture to live in any Condition in which we should be afraid to dye. I do not mean by this that we should not be satisfied, unless we can get such raised and lively Thoughts of another World, now in the time of our Health, as a Death-Bed, and a nearer View of Eternity is apt to give Men; for I believe that is hardly possible to be attained, even by the best Persons, while they have the Business and the Temptations of the World about them: But my Meaning is, as to the main of our State with respect to God, that we would not be satisfied till we have seriously, and impartially examined it; and after such Examination, have reasonable Ground to believe that it is good; and that if we should be called away to give an account of our selves, it may be well with us. There is certainly great reason why we should not be easy or satisfied till this be done, because we don't know but that we may be summon'd into the other World, in the Condition

we

we are in at preſent, whether it be good or bad. This is a thing not unlikely to happen, becauſe it has happend to great numbers, who had as little reaſon to expect it as any of us that are here preſent. Let us not therefore venture the Intereſt of our Souls, and of Eternity, upon ſuch Uncertainties as we would not venture the common Affairs of this Life: But let us often conconſider, that it may be ſome Diſeaſe or ill Accident may be ready to ſeize upon us; and what a ſad thing it will be to be called to appear before God, when we are not provided for it.

3. The laſt Uſe we ſhould make of the Uncertainty of our Lives is, to endeavour to bring our ſelves to a conſtant Dependance upon God, and a Reſignation of our ſelves to his Holy Will, to be diſpoſed of as he pleaſes, whether as to Life or Death. This is one of the nobleſt Duties of the Chriſtian Religion; hard, I doubt, to be attained; and yet conſidering the Uncertainty we are perpetually under, there can be no great Comfort in Life without it. We may however, and ought to pray, that God would be pleaſed not to take us hence but with all Advantage to Eternity; when our Souls are in the moſt prepared Condition, when we have not only *Oyl in our Veſſels*, but our *Lamps are alſo trimmed*, and

and we ready to *meet the Bridegroom, and to go in with him to the Marriage.* Mat. 25.

I have now done with my Text. Give me leave to conclude where I began. Let us therefore, to our Prayers for our ſelves, and our own Lives, add our Prayers for that Precious Life, which was, as this Day, given to theſe Kingdoms; That God would be pleaſed to continue It many and many Years a Bleſſing to them; And that every Year, as It paſſes, may be crowned with ſome freſh Mark of His Favour: That no Diſeaſe or ill Accident may approach Her Sacred Perſon, till at length, full of Days and Glory, She may Reſign Her Soul into God's Hands, and leave Her Memory Dear to all Poſterity. *Which God of his Mercy grant, for the Sake of Jeſus Chriſt: To whom with the Father and the Holy Ghoſt, be all Honour and Glory, World without end.* Amen.

FINIS.

Books *Written by the Reverend Dr.* Willis, *Dean of* Lincoln.

AN Addreſs to thoſe of the *Roman Communion* in *England*, occaſioned by the late Act of Parliament for the further preventing the *Growth of Popery*.

Reflections upon a Pamphlet, Intituled, *An Account of the Growth of Deiſm in England*: Together with ſome Conſiderations about the Chriſtian Religion.

A Sermon Preached at *Whitehall* before the Lords Juſtices of *England*, upon *Sunday, July* the 12th. 1701. Publiſhed by their Excellencies ſpecial Command.

Reflections upon Mr. *Toland's* Book, called *Chriſtianity not Myſterious*; with ſome Conſiderations about the Uſe of Reaſon in Matters of Religion, in a Letter to a Friend.

A Sermon Preached before the *Society for the Propagation of the Goſpel in Foreign Parts*, at their Firſt Yearly Meeting, on *Friday, February* the 20th. 1702. at St. *Mary le-Bow*.

A Sermon Preached before the Lord-Mayor on *Eaſter-Tueſday*, 1702. A Spittal Sermon.

Concio ad Sanctam Synodum ab Archiepiſcopo, *Epiſcopis & Clero*, Provinciæ *Cantuarienſis* celebratam, Habita in Eccleſia Cathedrali S. *Pauli, Londini* 20 Die *Octobris*, A. D. 1702.

A Sermon Preached at St. *Mary le-Bow*, to the Societies for *Reformation of Manners*, Jan. 3. 1704.

A Sermon Preached at St. *Andrew Holbourn*, to the Gentlemen concern'd in promoting the Charity-Schools in *London* and *Weſtminſter*, *June* the 8th. 1704. Being *Thurſday* in *Whitſon-Week*.

A Thankſgiving Sermon Preached before the *Queen* at St. *Paul's*, on *Thurſday, Auguſt* the 23d. 1705.

A Sermon Preached before the Honourable *Houſe of Commons*, at St. *Margaret's Weſtminſter*, on *Monday, November*, the 5th. 1705.

A Sermon Preached before the *Queen*, in the Royal Chappel at St. *James's*, on *Sunday, February* the 23d. 1707.

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